

Between Paradise and Political Capital: The Semiotics of Safavid Isfahan

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ABSTRACT

In the late 16th century the Safavid Shah Abbas I established Isfahan as the capital of his empire. He designed a plan on a monumental scale in the garden fields south of the old Saljuq center, which integrated the river Zayendehrud into the formation of the new palatial city. The orthogonal intersection of the Chahar Bagh Avenue and the river created a *chahar bagh* (four garden) pattern on the scale of a city, which produced a synthesis between Persian and Islamic concepts of paradise, Turkic nomadic traditions of ritual and social uses of gardens, and the principle of a royal capital city. The symbolism and figurativeness of Isfahan within the frame of a *chahar bagh* cannot be completely separated from traditional notions of garden and paradise, but goes beyond the allegoric interpretation of religious or mystical references to Islamic paradise, bearing distinct iconographic and deliberate political connotations of empire. This paper is based on the hermeneutic analysis of Safavid gardens and contrasts traditional interpretations of Persian and Islamic gardens along the paradigm of paradise with an expanded definition of the political implications of paradise.

*Have you seen Isfahan, that city like Paradise,
That holy cypress, that soul nourishing Eden;
That palace of the nation and that throne of government
That face of the seven spheres, that eye of the seven lands.¹*

PROLOGUE

The visual image of Isfahan has been inextricably shaped both by its architecture and its royal palace gardens. The city is acclaimed for the magnificence and splendor of its architecture, triumphant remainders of the Saljuq and Safavid empires. It has inspired generations of art historians, architects, archaeologists, artists, photographers, and tourists. Through city guides and coffee table books, Isfahan's architectural images were reproduced and proliferated into worldwide photographic effigies,² through which the domes and portals of the Safavid mosque *Masjid-i Shah*, the *Masjid-i Shaykh Lutf Allah*, the large plaza of the *Maidan-i Naqsh-e Jahan*, the palatial gardens of the *Bagh-e Hasht Behesht*, the labyrinth of the bazaar and the portico of the Saljuq *Masjid-i Jami'* have been promoted as the epitome of Islamic architecture.

In the latter half of the 20th century the pressure for industrialization in Iran created new concerns, and the development of urban centers brought renewed attention to Isfahan. The acceleration of urban growth and modernization programs under the aegis of the White Revolution, the Shah's 1960 land reform and industrialization program, generated studies on urban development, city planning, road construction, municipal infrastructure, water supply, sewage treatment, and the preservation of historical architecture.

¹ Jamal al-Din Isfahani: *Divan-i Kamil*, ed. Vahid Dastgirdi, Tehran, 1320, p. 410.
Didi tu Isfahan ra an shahr-i khold-i Paikar
An sidr-yi muqqadas, an 'adn-i ruh parvar
An bargah-i millat va an takhtgah-i dawlat
An ruy-i haft 'alam an chishm-i haft kishvar.

² Among the most renowned of these are Wilfried Blunt's *Isfahan, pearl of Persia*, and Lockhart's *Persian cities*, London: Luzac and Co. Ltd. 1960, and the recent publication of photographs of Isfahan by Nasrollah Kasraian.

The need to combine the city's historical corporeality with modern urban development has directed the interests of historical research and archeological investigations toward the background and development of individual palaces, mosques, shrines and palatial gardens, with less emphasis on their wider urban context or the historical and environmental morphogenesis of the Safavid city.

The strategic location, abundant water supply and fertile land facilitated the expansion and development of Isfahan in the 17th century on an unprecedented scale. As Safavid capital, Isfahan provided a synthesis between the complex relations of cultural perceptions of land, political expressions of territoriality and royal self-representation which were articulated by the symbolic language of its gardens and buildings.

Garden and paradise are two themes which are inextricably attached to Isfahan and recur in associative descriptions as well as taxonomic distinctions. A closer examination of the layout of Safavid Isfahan shows an internal order, which is structured along the axial quadripartite pattern of a *chahar bagh* (literally four gardens) formed by the axes of the river Zayendehrud and the royal avenue *Khiaban-i Chahar Bagh*. This underlying urban plan or composition combined the principles of Turco-Iranian forms of city and Perso-Islamic and Timurid patterns of garden. It created a dialectic relation between garden and city, based on the implicit practical interdependence of the natural environment and the architectural semiotics of royal political representation.

The traditional metaphorical interpretation of the Qur'anic or Islamic paradise as the quintessential rationale behind Persian gardens is epistemologically insufficient to explain the interactive patterns between the religio-political system and the iconography of a garden on the scale of a city. The ostentatious, almost monumental layout of the new city suggests that it was not a coincidental pattern but deliberately planned by its founder Shah Abbas I (1587-1629). Poets and writers consciously chose the metaphor of paradise to celebrate Isfahan's beauty and extol its pre-eminence as imperial city. The ubiquitous contemporary insinuations and poetic allusions of Safavid gardens to the Garden of Eden as well as the literary comparisons of Isfahan as *khuld-i barin*, the eighth level and uppermost tier of paradise, keep them explicitly tied to the idea of paradise.³ The implicit figurative connotation of Safavid Isfahan's quadripartite division along the four garden or *chahar bagh* model cannot be wholly separated from common religious notions of paradise either. Yet they reach beyond the allegoric interpretation of religious or mystical references to Islamic paradise, and bear a distinct political idiom. The textual and iconographic hermeneutics of royal Safavid

³ The label of paradise for Isfahan has developed into a standard topos. Carl Ritter called it "die Paradiesische Stadt" in the early 19th century in *Die Erdkunde von Asien*, vol. VI, G. Reimer, Berlin, 1840, p. 21. The analogy has since proliferated as Isfahan's standard epithet.

gardens, and of Isfahan specifically, ultimately lead to a synthesis between the paradise paradigm applied by traditional interpretations of Islamic gardens and the political intentions of Safavid architectural and urban representation.

THE PROFUSION OF GARDENS AND THE PARADISE PARADIGM

Gardens and their associated cultural and practical principles were a major component of the new royal city laid out by Shah Abbas I in the late 16th century in the suburban fields between the old Saljuq city and the river Zayendehrud. Identified as an Islamic dynasty, both in religious and political terms, Qur'anic notions of paradise have been understood as both the guiding motive and principle behind Safavid gardens. The concept of "Persian garden" in traditional interpretations has become almost synonymous with "Safavid garden." In their dual Persian and Islamic traditions, the architectural, artistic, and iconographic expression of Safavid gardens has conventionally been interpreted as a metaphor of paradise, referring to both the Biblical and Qur'anic descriptions for paradise.⁴ The Safavid garden has been seen as the apogee of the artistic temporal and human construction of the religious metaphysical paradisiacal garden of Islam.⁵ The association of garden with paradise was strongly influenced by the pervasive images and epithets such as *Hasht Behesht* (the eighth paradise or eight paradises), *Bagh-i Jannat* (paradise garden), and *Bagh-i Eram* (terrestrial paradise), as well as evocations and metaphors in their inscriptions, poetry and mystical traditions.

Western writers, especially since the late 18th and 19th century, inspired by contemporary archaeological trends, excavations and the neo-classicist trends in Europe, both explored and re-enforced the logical sequence of pre-Islamic and Biblical notions of paradise. Since Xenophon's use of the word *Paradeisos* for the gardens of Cyrus the Great,⁶ Persian gardens have been inseparably associated with their historical Achaemenid precedents, interpreted as terrestrial allegory of metaphysical, celestial Paradise. Early European travellers and explorers used the texts of Xenophon and other classical Greek writers as historical and literary reference, which were consulted and re-used by writers and travellers of the 18th and 19th century, who produced spirited descriptions of the scents, flowers, fruits and nightingales in Persia's gardens. "Alexander [the Great] is written to have seen Cyrus's tomb in a paradise," wrote William Temple in the 17th century, "so that a paradise among them seems to have been a large space of ground, adorned and beautified with all sorts of trees, both of fruits and of forest, either cultivated, like gardens, for

⁴ For Qur'anic descriptions of paradise see e.g. surah 3, 16; surah 4, 14, 58, 123; surah 6, 100; surah 3, 42-48; surah 47, 16; surah 55, 63-77; surah 56, 16-35. For a brief discussion of Quranic descriptions of paradise see: Marianne Barrucand: Gärten und gestaltete Landschaft als irdisches Paradies: Gärten im westlichen Islam, in: *Der Islam*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1988: 244-246. Biblical concepts of paradise are for example the Garden of Eden, Gen. 2, 1-14: profuseness and pleasure, Gen. 13, 10; abundance of water, Ez. 47, 1-12; fertility, Os. 2, 2-24; celestial journey of Paul, 2 Cor. 12, 4; eschatological visions, Apc. 2, 7.

⁵ Giovanni Curatola, for example, wrote, "with the Safavids the Persian garden paradise seems to reach its apex." In *Garden and garden carpets: an open problem*, in *Environmental design, water and architecture*, ed. A. Petruccioli, Aug. 1984: 92.

⁶ Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*. *Paradeisos* is derived from the Avestan *pairi-daeza*, meaning fenced in space, garden. For a more detailed examination of its etymology and transmission see Fauth: *Der Königliche Gärtner*, in *Persica*, no. VIII, 1979: 5-6.

shades and for walks, with fountains or streams, and all sorts of plants usual in the climate and pleasant to the eye, the smell, or the taste, or else employed, like our parks for inclosure and harbour of all sorts of wild beasts, as well as for the pleasure of riding and walking: and so they were of more or less extent, and of differing entertainment, according to the several humours of the princes that ordered and inclosed them.”⁷

Traditional metaphorical interpretations of Persian or Islamic gardens have correlated the general orthogonal symmetry to God’s perfection and transcendent purity. The straight lines have been seen to represent *tawhid*, divine unity, and sacred order between man and nature, in which order and harmony were expressed in mathematical regularity and unambiguous geometric patterns. The figure of the *chahar bagh* has been interpreted to denote the four quarters or directions of the universe. The orthogonal waterways have been seen to symbolize the four rivers of Eden;⁸ the water as the Christian and Muslim symbol of moral and sacred purification, the fish as unequivocal symbol of life, the towering cypress trees, pointing to the metaphysical after-life, as symbol of death, and lastly, the garden as universal metaphor for the positive and symbiotic relation between man and nature, where water channels give replenishment, green trees render comforting shade, and fruit orchards extend pleasure and nourishment.⁹

The paradise paradigm as analytical interpretation for Safavid gardens has developed into a conventional and strongly established topos with few variations or attempts to expand the hermeneutics of the theorem or to explore the gardens’ shape, function, and iconography in their historical context. A great deal of literature has been produced about the metaphysical and religious interpretations of the physical configuration of Safavid gardens. The general analytical approach to Persian gardens has classified them within their linear historic epochs, but the interdependence between garden and garden landscapes and the historical, cultural and political environment which produced them remains understudied. Research on Safavid gardens has primarily focused on the separate palatial gardens of Isfahan and others, such as the *Bagh-i Fin* in Kashan or the large garden complex of the *Bagh-i Shah* at Ashraf and Farahabad along the Caspian coast in Mazandaran. The driving ideas and the visions of the builders and architects, the meaning of spaces and architecture beyond the conventional and “terrestrial paradise,” and the gardens’ aesthetic and functional use, however, have been largely neglected. The method of describing the palatial gardens in an essentially kaleidoscopic juxtaposition, conveying their radiance, sensuality, and aesthetic expression, has not devoted enough atten-

⁷ William Temple: Upon the gardens of Epicurus, or, of gardening, in the year 1685, in: *Five miscellaneous essays*, ed. Samuel Holt Monk, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1963, p. 8. For the trend and scope in the literary tradition of western approaches to garden history, and 19th and early 20th century uses of the classics see i.e. Sieveking, Albertus Forbes: *Gardens, ancient and modern*.

⁸ “A river flowed from Eden to water the garden. The first is named Pison and this winds all through the land of Havilah where there is gold. The gold of this country is pure; bdellium and cornelian stone are found there. The second river is named Gihon, and this winds all through the land of Cush. The third river is named Tigris, and this flows to the east of Ashur. The fourth river is the Euphrates.” Genesis 2, 10–4. *The complete parallel bible*, Oxford University Press, 1989.

⁹ The most important studies, providing symbolic interpretations, and descriptive analyses with an emphasis on the internal sacredness and beauty of Isfahan’s gardens are Hanaway’s “Paradise on Earth: the terrestrial garden in Persian literature.” Ralph-Pinder Wilson’s “Persian garden: Bagh and Chahar Bagh,” in: E. B. MacDougall and R. Ettinghausen, (eds.): *The Islamic garden*, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, 1976; and Donald Wilber’s *Persian Gardens and Garden Pavilions*, Charles E. Tuttle, Vermont, Tokyo, 1963. The most recent publication on historic gardens in Iran rehearses this inseparable connection as the book’s *leitmotif* with the title *Persian gardens: echoes of paradise*. It portrays an intense and beautiful visual impression of historical Persian gardens within the framework of the paradise topos. Khansari, Mehdi; Moghtader, M. Reza; Yavari, Minouch *The Persian garden: echoes of paradise*, Mage Publishers, Washington D.C., 1998.

tion to the historical processes of their development, transformation, and relation to each other as a formation in a whole city or the interaction of the structural and metaphorical concept of garden and city, which is particularly evident in Isfahan.

The flourishing green countenance of Isfahan has earned it the designation “city garden,” which has been used in a sensual and almost romantic sense.¹⁰ In expressly visual descriptions, Safavid and Qajar Isfahan has been identified with the “profusion of gardens.”¹¹ As one of the many travellers of the early 19th century described it, “the valleys and plains for many miles around Ispahan, are adorned with villages and plantations; and the first view which the traveller has on coming from Shirauz, of this great metropolis, is from an eminence, about five miles from the city, when it bursts at once upon his sight, and is, perhaps, one of the grandest prospects in the universe.”¹² The European tradition of this description goes back to that of early depictions of travel authors like the physician and travel-explorer Engelbert Kaempfer (in Isfahan in 1684-85), Pietro della Valle (in Isfahan in 1619), Thomas Herbert (1628), Jean Chardin (1660s-70s), John Fryer (1677) and others. Without exception they invoked the impressive green resplendence after a journey through the dry, orange yellow, almost moon-like landscape of central Persia.

Sir Thomas Herbert, who sojourned in the city at the end of Shah Abbas I's rule, described Isfahan as “the metropolis of the Persian monarchy. Yea, the greatest and best built City throughout the Orient.” He found that the city's gardens “challenge our attention; than for which grandeur and fragor, no City in Asia out-vies her. It incloses so many that at some distance from the city, you would judge it a Forest; so sweet you would call it a Paradize.”¹³ All sides of the city were “beautiful, from the richness of the plain, profusion of gardens and the domes and towers of mosques and palaces, rearing their heads from amidst verdant groves of poplars, sycamores, and cypresses of the most noble size;” reads J. S. Buckingham's description.¹⁴ “Nothing can exceed in beauty and fertility, the country in the vicinity of Isfahan, and the first appearance of that city is very imposing. All that is noble meets the eye: the groves, avenues, and spreading orchards,” wrote Sir John Malcolm a few years later.¹⁵ The accounts offered a persuasive picture, which continues to be invoked by descriptions of Isfahan and its gardens today. Providing a sense of drama, they serve mostly as adornment to emphasize the extraordinary, without concern for the functional synthesis of garden and city expressed by the morphology of Isfahan.

The general symmetry and linear geometric patterns of Islamic and Persian gardens have often been contrasted with the “disorganized” and “unstructured” formation of the Islamic city. Although the

¹⁰ Moghtader et. al. *Echoes of paradise*, p. 69; also see Haneda “The Character of Urbanization of Isfahan in the Later Safavid Period,” *Pembroke Papers*, 4 (1996), pp. 369-88, reprinted in: Melville: *Safavid Persia*, p. 375.

¹¹ By J. S. Buckingham *Travels in Assyria, Media, and Persia, including a Journey from Baghdad by Mount Zagros, to Hamadan, the ancient Ecbatana, researches in Ispahan and the ruins of Persepolis*, 2 vols., Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830, p. 367.

¹² Kinneir, *Geographical memoir*, p. 112-3.

¹³ Herbert *Some years travels...* pp. 153 and 158-9.

¹⁴ In *Travels in Assyria*, vol. I, p. 367.

¹⁵ Malcolm *Sketches of Persia*, London, John Murray, 1849, p. 129.

ecological and political symbiosis of Islamic suburban gardens and cities have been recognized, the innate principles and functions of the Islamic city and garden have conventionally been contrasted as implicitly antithetical.¹⁶ The underlying formal structure of Safavid Isfahan incorporated an intentional quadripartite division with an inherent relation to the external urban expression of the city. The building of the new Safavid palace quarter created a dialectic affiliation between the old urban and new palatial center. Yet the development and expansion of the city, without the strict separation of the suburban gardens and the districts of the old center by a compact city wall, facilitated their gradual convergence.

Shah Abbas I's design of Isfahan was a pragmatic scheme, which aimed at a calculated synthesis of the practical and symbolic concept of garden and city and carried an implicit political dimension. The theme of garden was an essential exponent of Isfahan's Safavid morphology and internal rationale, which in its symbolic and political expression went beyond the phenotypical appearance.

HISTORICAL PARAMETERS OF THE SAFAVID CITY

Isfahan has been an important urban center since its origins as a military camp during Sassanian rule. Its enduring geo-strategic location, its agricultural advantages, and its facile and abundant supply of water from the Zayendehrud, (meaning the life-giving, the reviving, as well as the revived), enabled the city to develop into a leading metropolis. Isfahan's strategic position at the center of the commercial transit routes from China to the Ottoman empire and Europe, and the Persian Gulf to Russia, as well as the dual base of both agriculture and commerce, provided the essential pillars for its survival as urban center. This position determined the recurrence of a historical cycle of decline and prosperity, its repeated rise and fall from imperial to provincial capital.

Historically and architecturally Isfahan is most closely identified with the Safavids, but it had also been the political headquarters of the Buyids in the 10th and early 11th century, whose tenure, in spite of volatile political leadership, represented a period of prosperity for the city. Isfahan remained the center and political capital for most of Saljuq rule and regained this position five centuries later under the Safavids. The borders which outlined the domains of the Great Saljuqs placed Isfahan at the core of their empire's territories. Saljuq Isfahan's commercial and cultural prosperity reached its zenith during the reign of Malik Shah (1072-1092), when Isfahan also emerged as a leading center of Sunni theology. It was a period of internal architectural activity,¹⁷ which produced several great royal gardens including the *Bagh-i Falasan*, the *Bagh-i Bakr*, the *Bagh-i*

¹⁶ I.e. see Grandval in Moghtader: *Echoes of paradise*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Malik Shah's vizier Nizam al-Mulk established the famous *Nizamiyya* in the quarter of Dardasht. Numerous official and private buildings, mosques and parks were built, including the *Bait al Ma'* (Water House), the *Qaleh-yi Shahr*, and the *Qaleh-yi Diz Kuh*, the *Masjid-i Jami'* and the *Saljuq maidan*, which after it was transplanted by the Safavid city at the turn of the 16th century, became known as the *Maidan-i Kuhneh*.

Ahmad Siyah, the *Bagh-i Dasht-i Gur* (Garden of the Wild Donkey's Plain).¹⁸ The presence of the Saljuq government was contingent upon the economic and cultural prosperity of the city and many of the paradigms of Isfahan as a unique city, its geographical advantages, its fertility, its beauty, its sophistication, its tradition as a chief center of learning, culture and trade. Its famous epithet *nisf-i jahan*, meaning half the world, date to its position and aspirations as capital under Saljuq rule.

During Mongol rule Isfahan remained an influential city and commercial center, but it regained its political pre-eminence only with the Safavids. In the 17th century, at the height of Safavid territorial domination, the empire stretched from Mesopotamia, Gorjestan and Daghestan along the Qaraqum desert to the Sulaymaniya Mountains in the east. Its territory replicated the geopolitical order of the Saljuqs, again placing Isfahan at the center of the empire's crossroads. By moving his court and the seat of government from Qazvin to Isfahan in 1597–98 Shah Abbas I (1587–1629) re-enforced Isfahan's geographical advantages and its commercial importance by making it the political capital of his empire. The scope of historical memory and presence of Saljuq records at the time of the Safavids has not been sufficiently documented but there is some association with the historical precedence and the role of Saljuq Isfahan in the 12th century. Iskandar Beg Munshi cited Kamal al-Din's eulogy of the Saljuq capital in praise of the architectural achievements of Abbas the Great in the early 17th century: "Isfahan is flourishing and the people happy, nobody has a recollection of an epoch like this."¹⁹

Shah Abbas I himself designed and planned the new city, south of the old Saljuq center, laying the new bazaar and royal quarter on the existing urban and suburban landscape.²⁰ There is only vague information about the landscape of pre-Safavid Isfahan, but earlier gardens had existed outside the central Saljuq city and the palace grounds of the *Bagh-i Naqsh-i Jahan* and a *dawlatkhaneh* located there were known since the 15th century.²¹ Although there remained a certain dichotomy between the old and the new city, by the late 17th century, the Safavid quarter seemed to have coopted the old city physically as well as economically and politically. The Safavid city both engulfed the historic Saljuq district and through the junction of the bazaar and the *Maidan-i Shah* connected the new commercial and political center. The rapid growth of the city, the influx of human resources and money, the architectural expansion, as well as the introduction of artistic and political culture under Safavid rule thoroughly transformed the urban landscape. Shah Abbas' monumental layout of Isfahan, its architectural countenance

¹⁸ E.G. Browne, pp. 567–610; and 849–887; in: *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1902, p. 597. (Summary of Mafarrukhi's *Kitab-i Mahasin-i Isfahan*.) Also see Honarfar Lotfollah: *Ganjineh*, p. 57. For a list of names of other historic gardens see Alireza Aryanpour: *Pashuhesh dar Shenakht-i Baghhay-yi Iran*, p. 42.

¹⁹ *Isfahan haram ast va mardum shad In chinin 'ahd kasi nadarad yad*. Munshi, *Tarikh*, p. 545.

²⁰ Abbas I's transferral of the new city away from the old Saljuq center is distinctly shown in Quiring-Zoche: *Isfahan im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, p. 200. Also see Mashashi Haneda, schematic reprint of Seyyed Riza Khan's 1923–4 map in: "The Character of Urbanization of Isfahan in the Later Safavid Period," *Pembroke Papers*, 4 (1996) 369–88, reprinted in Melville, *Safavid Persia*, pp. 369–387.

²¹ The Venetian traveller Michelle Membré in the autumn of 1540 noted the beauty, the fine drinking water, and "many waters and gardens" outside the city, which he had still found enclosed by a mud wall. Membré, Michelle: *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia, 1539–1542*, transl. by A.H. Morton, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1993, p. 47. Also see Rosemarie Quiring Zoche: *Isfahan im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, pp. 36, 62 and 75. To the four gardens built by Malik Shah in Isfahan, see Mafarrukhi, al Mufaddal ibn Sad: *Kitab-i Mahasin-i Isfahan*, Matbu'at-i Majlis, Tehran 1993.

with his and his successors' palaces, mosques, bazaars, and extensive gardens within and without the city determined the physical and architectural profile by which Isfahan still continues to be identified at the dawn of the 21st century. Isfahan has acquired the title of 'Safavid city' and "anything that was to survive," as phrased by Bagher Shirazi, "was covered by Safavid color and forms."²² As he points out, the Arabs, Buyids and Saljuqs who successively ruled the city had done the same, but none of their building and restructuring of Isfahan was as profound as that of the Safavids.

THE CHAHAR BAGH AND THE SEMIOTICS OF THE CAPITAL CITY

The physical layout of the post-Saljuq city was devised by Shah Abbas I with a "preconceived master plan."²³ Iskandar Beg Munshi reported that Abbas I, in the spring of 1598-97, after spending the winter in Isfahan, decided to implement the building plans for the city. He began with the building of the quarter of the *Bagh-i Naqsh-i Jahan*. After eighteen years the architects, engineers, builders, artist and craftsmen had completed the "sublime" buildings and gardens of the *Naqsh-i Jahan*, which were part of the shah's very own plan.²⁴

A closer examination of Abbas the Great's ground plan of Isfahan south of the old Saljuq center reveals a transposition of the intersecting pattern of the walled Persian garden, with its clear quadripartite formation, the orthogonally intersecting water canals and an octagonal pool at the center of the channels' intersection.²⁵ Outlining the orientation of the royal city, the Zayendehrud created natural east west axis, crossed by the Chahar Bagh Avenue, which was divided by the *shah jub*, the main canal in its center and stretched from north to south. The direction of the Chahar Bagh Avenue with the center and sideways *jubs*, or water channels, was in this way used for the conscious re-construction of the quadripartite Persian *chahar bagh* on the scale of a city. It crossed the Zayendehrud over the Allahverdi Khan Bridge,²⁶ reaching from the *Darb-i Dawlat*, the gate of the royal precinct of the *Bagh-i Naqsh-i Jahan*, to the south side of the Zayendehrud as far as the garden of Abbasabad on the foot of the mountains, south of the city.²⁷ Albert de Mendelslo, who with Olearius was in Isfahan in 1637 under auspices of the Duke of Holstein's mission, described the "Tsarbagh" as the "King's Garden," which was divided by the Zayendehrud "so that it seems to make four Gardens of it."²⁸ Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716), who lived in Isfahan during the rule of Shah Suleyman for nearly two years also referred to this motive. "The royal avenue *Chahar Bagh*, i.e. four gardens," he explained, "derived its name from the fact that in conjunction with the

²² Bagher Shirazi "Isfahan, the Old: Isfahan the New," in: *Iranian Studies*, vol. 7, part II, no. 3-4, 1974, p. 589.

²³ Bagher Shirazi, p. 588.

²⁴ Munshi 1955, pp. 544-545. Of the process of Abbas I's gradual move from Qazvin to Isfahan see Roemer 1974, p. 306-331 and Quiring-Zoche 1980, pp. 105-6. On the interdependence between the old section of the Saljuq city and the new Safavid part see Bagher Shirazi, *ibid*.

²⁵ On the structure and layout of Persian cities see Bonine 1979, pp. 208-224. Bonine emphasizes the functional aspect and technical necessity for irrigation of city structures. For a classification of the various types of gardens which have been generally subsumed under the model of *chahar bagh*, see Mahvash Alemi "Il Giardino Persiano: Tipi e Modelli," in A. Petruccioli (ed.) 1994; *idem*: "Royal Gardens of the Safavid Period," in Petruccioli (ed.) 1997. Alemi questioned the view that the *chahar bagh* pattern manifests a strictly geometric quadripartite formation of gardens. Emphasizing the asymmetric elements in garden plans, she rejects the stereotyped symmetry and rigid axialities, concluding that the *chahar bagh* pattern does not correspond to a four part plan (Alemi 1986).

²⁶ Today it is mostly referred to as *Si-u-se-pul*. By contemporaries it was also called *Pul-i Chihil Chishmeh* or simply *Pul-i Chahar Bagh*. See Fryer, p. 296. Also see Honarfar Lotfollah *Ganjineh*, pp. 487-488.

²⁷ Munshi, p. 544. The garden was later known as the *Bagh-i Hizar Jarib*. Shahab Katouzian argues that the perpendicular axis between the Chahar Bagh and the Zayendehrud creates the synthesis between city and garden, the city's design being "based on the garden itself." "The Sense of Palace in Persian Gardens," in *Environmental Design*, Rome, I and 2, 1986, p. 47.

²⁸ de Mendelslo 1662, p. 331.

transverse intersecting river it partitioned the terrain into four garden areas. It begins behind the royal residence and stretches southwest in a straight and projecting line to the front side mansion and burgeoning Residence Hizar Jarib.”²⁹ The layout of Isfahan itself embodied, hence, a garden with its implicit symbolism of the four realms of the universe, the metaphorical space of the king’s domain. The *Khiaban-i Chahar Bagh* was one of the most acclaimed urban structures of the time. It was understood as the central axis through which the palatial city garden was articulated.³⁰ In his contemporary account Munshi particularly extolled the uniqueness of the Chahar Bagh Avenue. Kaempfer, too, emphasized the Chahar Bagh as the pivot of the city’s layout. Like Herbert, who found the Chahar Bagh “remarkable in that abundance of green, broad, spreading, Chenor trees, yielding shade, and incomparable order and beauty,” Kaempfer was impressed by the extraordinary size and height of the plane trees, which by the time he lived in Isfahan were about sixty years old, their luxuriant branches casting shade over the street, by forming a green portico or *Taq sabz* over the Avenue.³¹

In a brief paper about urban modernization and expansion, Baqher Shirazi emphasized the historic geographic premises of the Safavid construction of Isfahan. “For the first time in its history,” he noted, “Isfahan received two quite distinct orthogonal axes of expansion: the natural east-west axis (the river Zayendehrud) was augmented by the artificial north-south axis (Chahar Bagh).” The existing old commercial center of Isfahan circumscribed the expansion of the new urban midpoint. To secure access to the first draw of irrigation water, the *dawlatkhaneh*, had to be situated south, closer to the banks of the river, and further west, toward the upstream direction of the Zayendehrud. While the growth and expansion of the Safavid city shifted the center away from the existing commercial town, causing the decline and decay of some of the old quarters, it overgrew and converged with the pre-Safavid city. Shirazi argued that the “main organic linear center,” of the city persisted and the axes of the Zayendehrud and the Chahar Bagh Avenue remained chiefly the axes of the royal quarter: “nevertheless, they determined the total extension of the city in the centuries to come. The artificial north-south axis passed over the river on one of the most noble city elements,” the Allahverdi Khan bridge.³² The physical development of the city took place within the topographic delineation of Abbas the Great’s city plan. “The implementation of the plan whose north-south extension was about six kilometers in length,” recounted Shirazi, “imposed its geometric order on the immediately bordering new quarters, like Abbasabad and Julfa, while the expansion of other

²⁹ Kaempfer: *Aemontitatum*, Fasc. I, p. 172. It is quite possible that Kaempfer simply used de Mendelslo’s explanation. The Safavid sources do not comment on the etymology of the name, for which the European literal tradition makes only a tenuous proof. Pinder-Wilson (1885) is cautious about the principle mentioned by Mendelslo and Kaempfer. MacDonald Kinneir thought the avenue’s name being based on its structure, “so called from its connecting the upper and lower *Chahar Baug*, [...], which runs from the royal square to the foot of the mountains.” Kinneir, *Geographical Memoir*, p. 112. Most architectural accounts and garden studies, however, ascribed its name to the four vineyards which Abbas I supposedly had to buy when he built the avenue. This was advocated by Curzon, *Persia*, vol. II, p. 38. Iskandar Beg Munshi mentions that four gardens were laid out at each side of the street. He does not indicate that these four gardens gave the street its name. Savory in the annotation of his translation of Munshi claims that this was the origin of the name. Munshi: *Tarikh*, p. 544, Savory: *History*, p. 724.

³⁰ Porter 1994, p. 26.

³¹ Kaempfer: *Aemontitatum*, Fasc. II, p. 287. Herbert, *Some years Travels*, p. 159 and Fasc. I, p. 173.

³² Not the *Pul-i Khaju* as he wrote, which was the bridge connecting the Chahar Bagh Avenue. Baqher Shirazi, *ibid.*, pp. 588–589.

quarters followed the organic growth of the old town and only picked up the direction of the plan."³³

Safavid gardens are considered the pinnacle of Persian garden culture, but are distinctly influenced by the tradition of their historical antecedents. The form and function of Timurid gardens, which were used for military encampments and as sites for political and social activities, clearly recur in Safavid gardens.³⁴ Shah Abbas was born in Herat in 1571 where he lived until succeeding to the throne. The ground plan of Herat, whose urban profile had been extensively shaped during Timurid suzerainty, was divided into a very distinct quadripartite pattern. The Deccan city Hyderabad, which was planned in 1589 by Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah ten years before Abbas I's move to Isfahan, was based on an axial quadripartite pattern and founded on the garden suburb of Golkonda.³⁵ Shah Abbas I may not have seen Hyderabad, but he was definitely familiar with the idiom of the design of Herat. Terry Allan has argued that the "axial arrangement of the pavilions and gardens" west of the *Maidan-i Shah* was "derived directly from the organization of Timurid gardens." It was in the new city of Shah Abbas' Isfahan and the gardens of Babur's Kabul "that the memory of Timurid Herat lived on most vividly."³⁶

There has been a conspicuous correlation between the construction of grand gardens and territorial expansion; Timur began to build the gardens at Samarkand as he increased his territorial control. The Mughal shah Akbar (1556-1605) constructed large gardens at the height of his rule, and Abbas the Great began to design and build his capital after ten years of continuous military confrontations with the Ottomans.³⁷ The growth of Isfahan as *Dar al-Saltaneh* (Abode of Royal Government or Kingship) of Abbas I went hand in hand with vital internal military reforms, leading to the lasting subversion of the Turcoman military aristocracy and the expansion of Safavid frontiers. Between 1596-98 he incorporated the vassal states of Mazandaran, Lahijan and Rasht and, in 1592, Gilan. In 1598-99, a year after making Isfahan the seat of government, Shah Abbas reconquered Herat and Mashad from the Uzbeks and expanded to Balkh, Marv, and Astarabad. In 1010/1601 he annexed Bahrain. In 1013/1603-04 he went to war with the Ottomans, in defiance of the humiliating 1590 peace agreement, and repossessed Azerbaijan, Nakhchievan, Erivan, with a major victory over the Ottoman troops in Tabriz. Further campaigns in 1607-08 restored Shirvan and Gorjestan under Iranian control. The territorial expansion and consolidation took place concomitantly to the increasing centralization of the political administration which made Isfahan the symbol of the rise of Safavid Iran.³⁸

³³ Shirazi, *ibid.*, pp. 588-589.

³⁴ E.g. Wilber 1979, pp. 127-134.

³⁵ Hyderabad was also called Bhagyanagar, which is generally believed to be derived from the shah's concubine, a Hindu dancer called Bhagamati. Another explanation is that the original name was Baghnagar, meaning the City of Gardens, for which however contemporary documents do not exist. The axes of Hyderabad, like in Isfahan, were laid out from E-W and N-S. See Shah Manzoor Alam: *Hyderabad-Secunderabad*, pp. 23. Also see Annemarie Schimmel: *Deciphering the signs of God: a phenomenological approach to Islam*, Edinburgh University Press, 1994, p. 78. For a schematic map of Herat see Niedermayer and Diez: *Afghanistan*, Leipzig, 1924, which is reprinted in Gaube: *Iranian cities*, p. 45. Gaube argued in Isfahan "the new urbanistic concept introduced in Samarkand and Herat found its fulfillment." *Ibid.* p. 62. To both cities also see: Petruccioli: "Il Giardino come anticipazione dell città. Stoire parallele," in Petruccioli: *Il Giardino*, pp. 99-101.

³⁶ Terry Allan *Timurid Herat*, Ludwig Reichert Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1983, p. 55.

³⁷ See Roemer *Persien auf dem Weg in die Neuzeit*, pp. 310-312. Before the rise of Herat, Timur had named the quarters around Samarkand Sultaniyya, Shiraz, Bagdad, Dimashq, and Misr (for Cairo) to indicate the supreme position of Samarkand as supreme city of his empire. see: Barthold "Herat unter Husein Baiqara," in *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, XXII, 8, p. 111.

³⁸ "Symbol des Aufstiegs," as Roemer put it, in *Persien auf dem Weg*, p. 319.

Shah Abbas' decision to transfer his seat of government to the former Saljuq capital and re-develop the city was based on strategic, economic, and political considerations, as well as his personal liking of the city's climate; beyond this, it was an implicit reflection of his expansionist territorial goals and desire to create a specifically Safavid capital.³⁹ The relation between territoriality and royal gardens has been discussed in the context of Timurid and early Mughal gardens, which functioned as basis for conquest, the contention for a consolidated empire, places of exercise of power, and military and cultural domination.⁴⁰

The reconstruction of Isfahan according to Abbas I's plan shows comparable intentions. The consolidation of his territorial ambitions, his growing political and military hegemony, the centralization of the empire's administration, and the avowal of the Safavid doctrine of kingship as the Shadow of God on Earth, *Zill al-allah fi al-arz*, were epitomized in his plans of the city of Isfahan. The fact that the bridge, which connects the lower with the upper Chahar Bagh Avenue, was built by and carries the name of Allahverdi Khan, the *sepahsalar*, (commander in chief), contains a clear reference to the territorial and hegemonic connotation of the city's design.

As has been pointed out by the many architectural studies, the *Maidan-i Shah* created and represented the spatial and physical nexus of the bazaar, the religious establishment and the government.⁴¹ Most travelers have drawn attention to its commercial function, describing the many tents of fruit and vegetable sellers. Kaempfer recounted that in the 1680s the spaces of the lower floors around the four sides of the square's gallery were occupied by craftsmen and traders, while the upper floors were divided into small rooms for lodging which were also rented to foreigners, visitors and occasionally prostitutes.⁴² Reports by later travellers about soldiers being housed on the rooms of the upper gallery alongside the square, and the para-military polo games, *chawqan*, played and practiced on the *Maidan* at the time of Abbas I, seem to indicate that in addition to its commercial and public use it also had a military function.⁴³ Its titles *Maidan-i Naqsh-i Jahan* or *Jahan Nameh*, insinuate an expansionist perspective which confirms the semiotics of power and conquest behind the architectural structure of the city.

It has been argued that Abbas I was essentially an "itinerant" ruler and the concept of capital city as "permanent center for government and administration did not apply to this phase of the Safavid state."⁴⁴ The success of his military and political objectives could not have been predicted in 1006/1597-98. Nonetheless he seemed clearly intent on creating Isfahan as his political headquarters and royal capital of a consolidated Safavid empire. The city and

³⁹ Isfahan had serious strategic advantages. It was closer to the eastern borders and the Persian Gulf than Qazvin or Tabriz and it was still close enough to the western frontiers, which occupied by Ottoman troops. Hafez Farmayan stresses the origin and tradition of Isfahan as an old Iranian city, and choosing Isfahan has capital was also sign of the Iranization of Abbas I's regime. Farmayan, Hafez F. *The Beginnings of Modernization in Iran: The policies and Reforms of Shah Abbas I 1587-1629*, Middle East Center: Salt Lake City: Utah, 1969.

⁴⁰ See e.g. James Wescoat "Babur and the Timurid Chahar Bagh, Use and Meaning," in: *Environmental Design, Mughal Architecture, Pomp and Ceremonies*, 9th year, no. 11; and idem, "Gardens vs. Citadels: The Territorial Context of Early Mughal Gardens," in MacDougal *Garden History*.

⁴¹ See Haneda "The Urbanisation," in Melville *Safavid Persia*, p. 3.

⁴² Kaempfer *Aemonitatum*, p. 170. Iskandar Beg Munshi describes the rooms along the Maidan as *chahar bazar-i Naqsh-i Jahan* or as *khanat-i havali-yi Naqsh-i Jahan* Munshi: *Tarikh*, pp. 830 and 836. Savory has simply translated them as "shops;" *History*, pp. 1037 and 1044.

⁴³ See Kaempfer's drawing of the *Maidan* where cannons and armament are spread out in front of the Ali Qapu and tents of small scale traders are set up only in front of the *Quisarieh*; *Aemonitatum*, between pp. 170 and 171. Showing the military use even more distinct is the drawing by Hofstedt van Ess, reprinted by Alemi, in *Il Giardino*, p. 52.

⁴⁴ Charles Melville "The Itineraries of Shah Abbas I," pp. 11-26, cited in Susan Babaie *Safavid Palaces*, p. 44.

the political administration grew despite the shah's repeated absences from the city on military campaigns. The grand scale of Isfahan's plan, his restorations of the existing bazaar and pragmatic efforts to invigorate the commercial life as well as the permanent establishment of the royal administration, all betray his intention of laying the groundwork for a capital city on a long term basis. Sir Thomas Herbert who witnessed its shape after the development of almost thirty years, compared its rise as capital and symbol of Safavid hegemony with the imperial supremacy of ancient royal palace cities like Babylon, Tauris, Persepolis and Nineveh. In a bulky eulogy he deliberated the city's idiom of power.

"[...] Now royall Abas rules, Spahawn must rise.
(Where Kings affect, there most men cast their eyes,
There flock the people:) 'tis his power not thine
Which hath eclipsed their light, to make thee shine.
Then use thy fortune so, that none from thence
May with thy fall, or grudge they eminence."⁴⁵

The Chahar Bagh Avenue, which formed the central axis of Abbas I's city plan, was lined with thirty gardens along its sides. It posed as the urban representation of the Safavid states' administrative and military backbone. "The vast expanse of territory which is divided into four areas by the intersection of the street and the river," explained Kaempfer, "is partitioned by walls into thirty gardens." "Shah Abbas the Great [...] has not only personally chosen the position of the palace complex and demarcated the extension of the city," explained Kaempfer, "but furthermore, was also supposed to have determined the size and the design of the described gardens, attuned to the surrounding terrain."⁴⁶ He was awestruck by the beauty of the small domiciles, surrounded by wide and unblemished walkways, trees, flowers, and clear water pools.⁴⁷ These gardens were given to the chief officials courts, who also had the first right to channel water for irrigation into their gardens.⁴⁸ Under Shah Sulayman's rule (1666-1694) they continued along the *Khiaban-i Chahar Bagh* after the four royal gardens, including the *Bagh-i Khargah*, the *Bagh-i Hasht Behesht*, the *Bagh-i Musaman* and the *Bagh-i Takht*. The owners of these gardens along the Avenue were the shah's chief officials, among them, the *Sufidar Bashi* (commander of the Safavid order), the *Qullar Bashi* (commander of the royal guard), *Qurchi Bashi* (commander of the cavalry), and the ^ (quartermaster general).⁴⁹ Between the four royal gardens and the river were seven societal lots, including the *Takiyyeh-yi Ni'matullah* and the *Takiyyeh-yi Haidar*.⁵⁰

⁴⁵Thomas Herbert *Some Years Travel*, p. 153.

⁴⁶ Kaempfer *Aemontitatum*, Fasc. I, p. 198. Also see Honarfar, *Ganjineh*, p.479-493. Also see Baqer Shirazi *ibid.*, p. 589. Masashi Haneda argues that it is not certain whether there were special quarters for the Jews and Indians. See "Urbanization of Isfahan," in Melville: *Safavid*, p. 386.

⁴⁷Kaempfer *Aemoenitatum Exoticarum: Politico-Physico Medicarum*, Fasc. I, pp. 173-174.

⁴⁸ See Fryer *A New Account*, pp. 240 and 296.

⁴⁹See Kaempfer's drawing of the *Bagh-i Naqsh-i Jahan*, and the Chahar Bagh Avenue, which shows all thirty gardens with the names of their owners. Reprinted from the Sloane collection of the British Library, in Mahvash Aleami "Gardens of the Safavid Period," in Petruccioli, *Gardens in the Time of the Great Muslim Empires*, pp. 82 and 83.

⁵⁰ Isfahan, like most Safavid cities, was divided into two zones between the order of the Ne'matollahis who controlled the eastern part of the city and held the Takkieh on the eastern side of the Chahar Bagh, and the Haydaris who commanded the quarters roughly along the west of the Chahar Bagh Avenue, and held the Takkieh on the western line of gardens. See Ansari: *Tarikh-i Isfahan*, pp. 97-98. For a general discussion about the background of the

Kaempfer also pointed to a historical continuity of which Abbas I, if not deliberately imitating it, must have been aware. "With the planning of the Chahar Bagh," expounded Kaempfer, "he was said to have directed the delineation with his own hands, which he proved himself as real and laudable descendant of the great Cyrus, who as may be read in Xenophon, took the design of gardens as a kingly occupation and who not seldomly planted plants and measured the rows of trees also with his own hands."⁵¹ Thus, the city's internal rationale as well as its external representation states a direct link between kingship and the creation of gardens. The practical act of the shah himself mapping, planning and planting a tract of land is also expression of the royal control and ownership of territory.⁵²

The Safavid garden and the city of Isfahan as a large example of such, had definite functional, symbolic, and aesthetic links to the Safavid state. The van of the royal garden was usually created by a palace, which was the governing point of the garden's structure. The palace and the garden created an organic unit with a gradual progression from the interior of the palace through a transitional narthex (*ivan* or *talar*) which is both part of the palace and the outdoors, leading into and also connecting the garden to the building. Akin to the classical palatial garden, the urban space devised by Abbas I through the crossing of the Chahar Bagh Avenue and the Zayendehrud was presided over by the royal quarter and *dawlatkhaneh*, the *Bagh-i Naqsh-e Jahan* on the northern end, and overseen by the *Bagh-i Hizar Jarib* on the southern end. It created the same relation between the central palace and government quarter and the city as existed between a palace and its surrounding garden, in which the palace constitutes the head and the focus of the system.

The architectural iconography of royal gardens, as much as it provided a space for pleasure and enjoyment, also articulated the domination over nature, including the control of land and water, the source of life and prosperity *sine qua non*. Traditional interpretations understood the use of water in pools and fountains as the obvious symbol of life. In the context of a more pragmatic rendition the use and display of water, and in the case of Isfahan the river as part of the city's *chahar bagh* pattern, recognizes the eternal interdependence of the organic relationship between the river, the city, and the surrounding country side and is a statement of the absolute royal guardianship over life and property.

Shah Abbas I had gradually turned most of the lands in Isfahan and its surroundings from *mamalik* (state lands) into *khassseh* property (land and estates owned by the crown). Rather than a reflection of the mere religious-metaphysical relation to nature, Safavid royal gardens, and Isfahan as a royal garden on the scale of a city, are a

Haydari and Ne'mati division see Hossein Mirjafari: "The Haydari and Ne'mati Conflicts in Iran" in *Iranian Studies*, vol. XII, 1979, pp. 135–162. Kaempfer mentions that Shah Sulayman was a follower of the Haydaris.

⁵¹ Kaempfer *Aemontitatum*, Fasc. I, p. 198. Iskander Beg Munshi does not mention the Achaemenids, but he does compare the Safavid gardens and palaces of Isfahan to Sassanian palaces, *Tarikh*, p. 545. For discussion of the image and role of Khavarnaq in Iranian epic literature see Renard: *Islam and the Heroic Image*, pp. 173 and 175.

⁵² Also see: Wescoat, "Picturing an Early Mughal Garden," in: *Asian Art*, fall 1989, p. 76.

reflection of the socio-political aspects of the division, control, organization of land ownership and cultural production.

Isfahanis were always proud of the exceptional fecundity of Isfahan's earth, its bounteous river and good climate. The surviving notion of Isfahan being a place with special benison has its roots in Saljuq times. It was believed that Isfahan was at the center of the "fourth clime", which in the system of Ptolemaic cosmology was considered the best of the earth's seven astrological belts, each of which was presided over by a planet.⁵³ The location of Isfahan in this world system has been used to explain its outstanding fertility, and has played an important role in the justification of its eminence as a city and the attribution of its paradisiacal qualities. The city's epithet *nisf-i jahan* (half the world) as well as the name *Bagh-i Naqsh-i Jahan* (Garden of the World's Picture) of the palace complex, offers the notion of Isfahan at the center of the empire, and the world in imperial and religious terms. This suggests that Shah Abbas positioned his capital in a deliberate competitive self-definition with the world. The semiotics of the location and architecture implies a political, cultural as well as religious hegemony. Under Safavid patronage Isfahan developed into the foremost center of Shi'ite theology and orthodoxy in the Islamic world. Iskander Beg Munshi notes that Abbas I built the *Masjid-i Shah* intending to surpass the *Masjid-i Aqsa* in Jerusalem and the *Ka'ba* in Mecca, which is a clear statement of ambitions beyond the local or regional.

The quadripartite delineation of Safavid Isfahan also denoted the hierarchical order of the cosmos, pointing to the position of the world and the shah within it. The city was at once the creation and the reflection of the king's domain. Abbas I's conception of Isfahan perpetuated the function of garden as an allegoric and symbolic political order on multiple levels. It centered in the internal space of palace courtyards and from there expanded to the level of the walled palace and government gardens of the *Bagh-i Naqsh-i Jahan*, to the next level of the city with its axial center from where it extended to the level of the province, and after that to the expanse of the empire's domains. This pattern may be interpreted as perpetuating further from the territory of the empire, encompassing the realm of the globe and reaching from there to the metaphysical world of the universe to the seven spheres of heaven, to the 'arsh, the throne or seat of God.⁵⁴

The palaces and gardens of the later Safavids like the *Hasht Behesht*, the *Aineh Khaneh*, Shah Sultan Hussayn's garden of Farahabad, were mainly extensions to this fundamental structure. They reflected greater ostentation and a panoply of royal self-representation with a stronger emphasis on pleasure and enjoyment as opposed to the articulation of political and territorial aspirations, which is discernible in the earlier gardens, palaces and mosques of Shah Abbas I.

⁵³ See "Account of a rare manuscript History of Isfahan," described by E.G. Browne in: *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1902, pp. 414 and 419. Also see Hamdallah Mustawfi al-Qazvini *Nuhzat al Qulub*, transl. by Guy Le Strange, E.J. Brill, Leyden, 1919, pp. 55. For discussion of the theme of Iranian cosmology in literature see Renard *Islam and the Heroic Image*, pp. 79–80.

⁵⁴ See the diagram of J. Wescoat in "Gardens versus Citadels: The Territorial Context of Early Mughal Gardens," in MacDougall, *Garden history, issues, approaches, methods*, p. 347. John Renard pointed out how in the literary epic *sira* of Antar ibn Shaddad, "the hero's adventures unfold in a quadripartite world, each quarter of which constitutes the realm of an integral monarchy. The four realms are Byzantium; Sassanian Persia, with its capital at Ctesiphon, (Mada'in); the region of Hind and Sind [...]; and what one might call 'greater Ethiopia.'" Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image*, p. 169–70.

EPILOGUE: THE POLITICAL CIRCLE OF PARADISE

The figurativeness of Safavid Isfahan conveyed a pervading sense of a leading city, as cultural, political, religious and imperial center and the exclusive domain of the shah. The motives of political and dynastic self-representation in Shah Abbas' layout of Isfahan and the iconographic as well as textual references to paradise remain inextricably attached to Isfahan. Contemporaries consistently applied the metaphor of *khuld-i barin* or *khuld-i paikar* to the city. Rustam al-Hukama, chronicler and native of Isfahan, left no doubt that when Aqa Muhammad Khan Qajar conquered Isfahan at the end of the 18th century it was a city equal to the highest paradise, *khuld-i barin*, despite the destruction caused by the tribal and civil wars of the 18th century. Yet, he not only intended to praise Isfahan's beauty and express his liking of its open and metropolitan spirit but also to underscore its political stature and superiority.⁵⁵

In his research and publications about Mughal gardens, James Wescoat argues that Mughal gardens expressed a "denotation but not connotation of Islamic Paradise," that is, they "achieved the form, but not the meaning of paradise gardens."⁵⁶ This subtle but crucial distinction applies to Safavid royal gardens as well.

Aesthetically, Safavid gardens, like Mughal gardens, incorporated clear references to the pictorial imagery of Qur'anic paradise, but the builders' semiotic intent had also pragmatic goals with roots in the profane world, which was largely disinterested in the eschatologic implications of a metaphysical paradise in its essentially religious or theological meaning. Further readings of Safavid theological, scientific, and philosophical texts may yield more precise insights into the contemporary *weltbild* and the implications of cosmological models on political legitimacy as well as the relationship between paradise and political hierarchy.

Aside from the *Bagh-i Hasht Behesht* (The Garden of the Eighth Paradise) the names of the early palatial gardens laid out by Abbas the Great carry largely political-secular connotations which invoke size, status, and often their function, like the *Bagh-i Abbasabad* or *Hizar Jarib* (The Thriving Domain of Abbas or Garden of a Thousand Acres), *Bagh-i Naqsh-i Jahan* (Garden of the World's Picture), *Bagh-i Takht* (Garden of the Throne), *Bagh-i Khargah* (Garden of the Donkey), and those of simple ownership or cultivated fruit.⁵⁷

Persian Islamic gardens have developed in a dialectic cycle of pre-Islamic Persian garden traditions and Islamic and Qur'anic notions of paradise, which derived their imagery of paradise from contemporary pre-Islamic and Persian traditions. The forms of Pre-Islamic Persian gardens have roots in the antecedent garden structures of Mesopotamian and Egyptian gardens and probably absorbed

⁵⁵ Muhammad Hashim Asif, Rustam al-Hukama *Rustam al-Tawarikh*, ed. Muhammad Mushir, Intisharat-i Amir Kabir, Tehran, 1352, p. 454.

⁵⁶ James Wescoat "From the Gardens of the Qur'an to the Gardens of Lahore," in *Landscape Research*, 20 (1) 1995, pp. 19-25.

⁵⁷ The *Bagh-i Hasht Behesht* was only built in 1670, by Shah Sulayman (1667-1694).

major structural, functional and aesthetic patterns from Assyrian Gardens of the 8th century BC.⁵⁸ The Safavids created a Shi'ite state and orthodoxy, whose theological system provided a direct basis of political legitimacy. At the same time, there are evident pre-Islamic Iranian traditions which surface in Safavid notions of divine kingship, with direct implications for politics and statehood. The Qur'anic or Islamic paradise as connection between both is not implausible, as Qur'anic images of paradise have roots in the pre-Islamic Persian and Mesopotamian traditions of worldly gardens. The concept of *chahar bagh* in the Safavid city garden of Isfahan thus has links to the metaphysical divine order of political power, which the Safavids deliberately insinuated.

The two interpretations, political-functional and metaphysical-sacred or theological, are not necessarily contradictory. If 16th and 17th century royal Persian gardens are analyzed as representative of royalty, reflection of kingship and territorial control, the theological aspect or divine inspiration of Safavid kingship has again a metaphysical and theological aspect, albeit with political consequences.

The allusions the Qur'an in Safavid gardens were less a reflection of the theological and eschatological meaning of the Qur'anic paradise. In the case of Isfahan, the *chahar bagh* pattern staged a nexus of pre-Islamic Iranian traditions of divine kingship and Shi'ite concepts of legitimacy. Safavid gardens, and Isfahan as a grand royal garden on the scale of a city, had very strong elements of regal self-representation. It was an expression of royalty, power, and a statement of political sovereignty as it was innately linked to the rise and fall of the Safavid empire. Its symbolism combined worldly political power with the theological mandate of monarchical authority, through which the Safavids aimed to balance divine kingship and Shi'ite legitimacy. This is based in the metaphysical world, where paradise is the domain or abode of God, the absolute and ultimate source of might and authority.

The form of the classical Persian garden was a deliberate *leitmotif* in Shah Abbas' location of the capital and the outline of the new part of the city. The organization of Safavid Isfahan represented a space of political consolidation, the epitome of centralization, expression of dynastic legitimacy and the primary center of exercise of power and territorial control. Isfahan was thus the quintessential royal garden and not only the geographic but also the allegoric midpoint of the Safavid empire, the *Maqarr al-saltaneh*, the royal city and residence of the shah, the highest abode of paradise, the definitive source and center of power.

⁵⁸ On the influence of Achaemenid and Sassanian Gardens see R. Pechère "Etudes sur les Jardins Iranien," in *Les Jardins de l'Islam: Compte Rendu du 2^eme colloque International sur la Protection et la Restauration des Jardins Historique Organisé par l'Icomos et l'Ifra*, Granada 1973, pp. 19-25; David Stronach "Paterres and Stone Watercourses at Pasargadae: Notes on the Achaemenid Contribution to Garden Design," *Journal of Garden History* (special edition of "Site and Sight in the Garden, ed. by E. Kryder-Reid and D.F. Ruggles,) 1993. See also Mahvash Alemi "Der Persische Garten: Typen und Modelle," in *Der Islamische Garten, Architektur, Natur, Landschaft*, ed. Attilio Petruccioli, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart, 1995, pp. 39 and 41. Most important to the discussion of the relationship between kingship and garden during the Achaemenids and Sassanians is the article of W. Fauth "Der Königliche Gärtner" in *Persica*, no. VIII, 179, pp. 1-53.

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